

AUDIO

FAQ

Q My MP3 player doesn't come with a mains adaptor. How am I supposed to charge it?

A Mains chargers are rarely included with modern MP3 players. Apple got away with not including one with the iPod, and pretty much everyone else followed suit. However, these players can be charged through their USB connection to a PC. This is a good system, as it cuts down on cabling (both in terms of tangles of wires and extras that you're ultimately paying for) and means the player charges as you copy new music to it.

However, it's less practical for long trips away from a PC, such as a holiday. For these occasions, consider buying a mains charger separately. Apple's World Travel Kit costs £29, but other universal USB chargers (essentially an AC/DC adaptor with a USB port) are available from around £10.

Ben Pitt

Music and photography expert

ben@computershopper.co.uk

TERRATEC Noxon 2 radio for iPod

★★★★

£250 inc VAT

Terratec's latest addition to its Noxon range of network media players is jam-packed with features. The most visible one is an iPod dock, which joins network locations and internet radio on the list of music sources. Around the back there's an aerial socket for an FM radio, while a door on the side reveals a USB socket for playing music directly from USB storage devices. There's an alarm clock and support for a wide range of file types. Speakers are built into the base unit and there are phono and optical outputs to feed other speakers.

The player quickly found our wireless network and, after we had gone through the fiddly process of entering the WPA password with the remote control, located the Universal Plug and Play (UPnP) server running in Windows Media Player 11 on a networked PC. As usual with UPnP streaming, browsing our 30GB library of MP3s was fairly slow and arduous, and it wasn't helped by the cranky search facility. Once located, tracks started playing quickly but the first couple of seconds were often omitted.

The iPod dock doesn't come with adaptors for different models, so our iPod Mini was supported just by its dock connection, which feels fairly fragile. However, there isn't much reason to touch it once it is docked, as you select tracks using the Noxon's screen and controls. Once again, this made browsing long lists slow compared with using the iPod's click wheel, but it was nice to be able to do so with the remote control.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Wide range of music sources
- ✓ Compact design
- ✗ Expensive

NETWORK MEDIA PLAYER iPod dock (compatible with all docking iPods), USB removable storage controller, supports MP3 streams, local MP3, WMA, WMA-DRM, AAC, Wav and Ogg Vorbis files, wired Ethernet and wireless 802.11g interfaces, WEP and WPA encryption, line, optical S/PDIF and headphone outputs, 18W RMS power
PART CODE 10205
SUPPLIER www.maplin.co.uk
DETAILS www.my-noxon.com



Internet radio is the highlight. More than 10,000 stations are superbly presented by location and genre, and few were inactive. Sound quality was surprisingly good for a small unit, and there's plenty of volume on tap, but the Noxon 2 didn't compare well with similarly priced hi-fi or even fairly cheap PC speakers.

As usual for a device with an integrated iPod dock, the Noxon is expensive. Sound quality is better than that of the Noxon iRadio (*What's New, Shopper* May 2007), but this, along with the dock and the USB socket, doesn't justify the fact that the newer model costs almost twice as much. Buying the Philips SLA5520, Logitech's X-230 (see 'Also consider...', below) and Apple's iPod Universal Dock would give similar features and superior sound for much less money. However, the Noxon's compact, all-in-one design and excellent internet radio support mean that, even at this price, it's still a desirable package.

Ben Pitt

Also consider...

PHILIPS SLA5520

★★★★★

£80 inc VAT

Philips' SLA5520 takes music from your PC via a wireless network and plays it on your hi-fi. It comes with Philips' own server program, but you can also use it with Windows Media Connect.

The SLA5520 is quite a basic device, but it's a great buy if you want an easy way to play your music wirelessly.



WIRELESS NETWORK MUSIC PLAYER Supports MP3, Wav, WMA, WMA-DRM, 802.11g interface, WEP or WPA encryption, 3.5mm socket audio output. Requires Windows 2000/XP
SUPPLIER www.broadbandstuff.co.uk
DETAILS www.philips.com
✓ Good value ✗ Screen hard to read
FULL REVIEW Jul 2006

LOGITECH X-230

★★★★★

£24 inc VAT

The X-230s sound clearer, richer and more balanced than any other set under £50 and quite a few that are more expensive than that. If you're looking for a good set for music or games, there are no better speakers available at this price.



STEREO SPEAKERS 2.1, 32W power, 3.5mm stereo cable inputs
PART CODE 970123-1120
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.logitech.com
✓ Excellent sound quality ✗ Cabling is awkward
FULL REVIEW Jun 2007

LOGITECH Z-5450

★★★★★

£215 inc VAT

Logitech's Z-5450 5.1 surround-sound speakers transmit sound to the rear set wirelessly, so you'll have less clutter in your living room. Sound quality is excellent and the speakers are loud.

With loads of inputs and a decoder, these speakers are perfect for a PC or DVD player.



5.1 SPEAKERS Three line inputs, one coaxial and two optical digital inputs, 315W RMS power
PART CODE 970191-0120
SUPPLIER www.kikatek.com
DETAILS www.logitech.co.uk
✓ Sound great; loads of features ✗ Expensive
FULL REVIEW Dec 2006

IRHYTHMS A-211

★★★★★
£103 inc VAT



The vast majority of iPod dock speakers are self-contained units, but the A-211 follows a more conventional 2.1 layout common to PC speakers. This makes them less suitable for use in a kitchen but better for studies and some living rooms where the subwoofer can be hidden out of view. It's disappointing, then, that there isn't a USB pass-through for connecting the docked iPod to a PC. The auxiliary input's location on the dock rather than the subwoofer shows that iRhythms expects the set to be used primarily with iPods rather than with both iPods and PCs.

The upside of the 2.1 speaker configuration is that the satellites can be spaced apart to produce a wide stereo sound, which gives a huge boost to the perceived sound quality. The bulky subwoofer had no problem churning out deep bass and the satellites produced crisp, detailed middle and high frequencies, giving the best sound quality – and certainly the highest volume – we have heard from iPod dock speakers.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ High sound quality
- ✓ Good stereo separation
- ✗ No USB data connection

IPOD DOCK SPEAKERS 2.1 configuration, 133W RMS power, compatible with all docking iPods and first-generation Shuffle, auxiliary line input
PART CODE LN16326
SUPPLIER www.scan.co.uk
DETAILS www.irhythms.com



SCANDYNA Micropod SE Active

★★★★★
£199 inc VAT



Few PC peripherals are as gorgeous as Scandyna's Pod speakers. The Micropod SE Active is the smallest set in the range, with each speaker just 20cm tall including its aluminium legs. They're available in white, black, silver, blue, yellow or red, and the quality of the design made us feel a bit guilty for placing them among the clutter on our desk. We would be slightly nervous that they might attract the attention of young children who could easily damage the unprotected speaker cones. Power and a single minijack audio input are located on the back of the right speaker next to a volume/power knob and terminals for the cable to the left speaker.

Sound quality was a significant step up from that of most compact speaker systems, with a smooth, focused tone, although the small design meant bass wasn't very deep. The speakers are expensive, but anyone who likes beautiful design more than pumping bass won't be disappointed. Be careful to get the Active version unless you already have an amplifier to use them with.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Beautiful design
- ✓ Focused, controlled sound
- ✗ Expensive

2.0 SPEAKERS Line input, 20W RMS power
PART CODE AMSE05-P
SUPPLIER www.urbanjunkie.co.uk
DETAILS www.podspeakers.com

CHOOSING AN... MP3 Player

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

CAPACITY: 512MB
TECHNOLOGY: Flash memory
INTERFACE: USB Hi-Speed
BATTERY: Disposable
SUPPORTED FORMATS: MP3, WMA
Recommended minimum in grey

1 Above you'll see a typical specification for an MP3 player that costs £30. Using flash memory means it can be very small and light, but its 512MB capacity provides room for just a few albums of MP3s encoded at 128Kbit/s. It's worth buying a player with 1GB or more to provide greater listening choice while on the move.

Cheap players often cut corners when it comes to sound quality, so approach these with caution. Flash-based players aren't sensitive to shocks or bumps, so they're ideal if you want to use them while jogging.

2 If you don't mind something bulkier, consider devices that use alternative storage technology. Hard disk-based players have up to 60GB capacity, so they can hold hundreds of albums; prices start at £150. Players based on tiny 1in hard disks of between 1.5GB and 8GB capacity cost from £100, and provide an excellent balance of portability and capacity. Hard disk players are sensitive to shocks and can be damaged if dropped, so you need to take care of them.

3 You'll need a PC to upload files to your MP3 player. A USB Hi-Speed interface will enable you to upload files a lot quicker than using a USB 1.1 connection.

4 Battery life varies between two and 50 hours. Hard disk players are the most power-hungry and benefit from a lithium-ion battery, which is light and easy to recharge.

If you will be away from a power supply for long periods, look for a player with a replaceable battery so you can carry spares.

5 If you want to download files from online music stores, you'll need a player that supports protected tracks. If you've got an iPod it will play only tracks purchased from the iTunes Music Store. If you've got a different player, make sure it plays protected WMA files. If a player is certified with the Plays For Sure logo it will play all protected WMA files available from the biggest music stores.

LOGITECH AudioStation

★★★★★
£123 inc VAT



Logitech's AudioStation is a mid-range iPod speaker dock, but it sounds better than many that cost more. It's the only dock we've tested with an FM tuner, a sensible addition given no iPod has its own. You can't synchronise a docked iPod with your PC, but the AudioStation is great value, and the first iPod dock to deserve our Best Buy award.



IPOD DOCK STEREO SPEAKERS iPod dock connector and 3½mm stereo line input, composite/S-video outputs, FM radio, 80W RMS power PART CODE 97 0217-0120 SUPPLIER www.lambdatek.com DETAILS www.logitech.co.uk ✓ Clear, loud sound ✗ No iPod PC connector FULL REVIEW Jan 2007

SANDISK Sansa e270

★★★★★
£89 inc VAT



Sandisk's Sansa e270 has 6GB of storage, but it costs less than Apple's 2GB iPod Nano. Unlike the Nano, it can play back video files on its colour screen; its software makes it easy to convert and transfer them. It isn't as easy to use as an iPod, but its good battery and sound make it a great choice.

FLASH MP3 PLAYER 6GB capacity, supports MP3, WMA and WMA-DRM music, JPEG/bitmap picture files and proprietary video files, USB Hi-Speed interface PART CODE SDMX4-6144 SUPPLIER www.zoodex.com DETAILS www.sandisk.co.uk ✓ Lots of space; good sound ✗ Nano has better controls FULL REVIEW Feb 2007

Battery life -50% Reference +50% +100%



APPLE iPod Shuffle

★★★★★
£50 inc VAT



Apple's tiny iPod Shuffle is affordable and beautifully designed. It's light, with an integrated metal clip that grips clothing securely. The controls are basic; you can only skip tracks. The battery life and sound are both good, though, so it's a great player if you can live without a screen and don't mind using iTunes.

FLASH MP3 PLAYER 1GB capacity, supports MP3, AAC, protected AAC, Wav, AIFF, audible and Apple lossless music, USB Hi-Speed interface PART CODE MA564ZT/A SUPPLIER www.dabs.com DETAILS www.apple.com/uk ✓ Tiny; great design ✗ No display FULL REVIEW Feb 2007

Battery life -50% Reference +50% +100%

